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In an experiment designed to involve reluctant learners in a creative learning experience, a class of youngsters assumed the role of a Sahara Desert tribe and talked about their perplexity in finding a chair washed up on the beach. Using this incident as the focal point for a project, the teacher divided the children into small groups to compose their versions of the dramatic situation that might ensue. Dialogues from each group were combined into a short drama which was cast, rehearsed, staged, and taped with appropriate background music. Although the quality of the children's writing, spelling, and use of English varied considerably from standard form, their complete attention was absorbed in mime, role playing, group and individual composition, interpretative reading, memorization, and set decoration. Such a project could easily be expanded to include studies of real desert tribes, staging techniques, and script writing. (JM)

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A SITTING-THING

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If a chair be defined a seat for a single person with a back belonging to it . . . Watts, Logick.

The idea was not my own but communicated to an Ayrshire English Development class on "Drama in the Classroom" by Mr Jerry Slevin, Adviser on Drama to the City of Edinburgh. A chair is cast up on the beach of a remote island in the Pacific—just an ordinary chair such as is found in any classroom, but the islanders have never seen one.

In the second-last week of the session I had no difficulty in borrowing a suitable class; 1F had had a succession of English teachers, none of whom would have protested. As I started speaking I looked round the room and they were siting at desks with seats attached. The only chair had a tubular metal frame and would have sunk like a stone. Modified their course might be but they would have queried that.

"You're a tribe," I told them, "living—in the Sahara Desert." Nevertheless, as if they had been reading my thoughts, the first thing they asked for was coconut-palms and they never quite accepted dates as a substitute. They knew the word "oasis," or one of them did, and asked if there was grass; could they have sheep? I could see no objection to this and threw in goats and camels for good measure. But I wouldn't give them stone houses and hesitated long enough over "clay" for somebody to suggest skin-tents. They admitted that they sat on the ground or on skins and this was the moment to up-end the chair and call out the first tribesman.

He was going to touch it but I stopped him and we circled it cautiously till we were satisfied that it was harmless. Then he shifted it, turned it one way and another; finally, after an enquiring glance at me, to which I returned an affirmative nod, set it on its legs and sat on it. Probably for the first time in months 1F was silent. After that I brought them out in threes and then divided the class into groups.

They needed help with names. I suggested Abdul and his two sons, Raschid and Mohammed; for the girls, Fatima and Sheba. Suggestions from the floor included Solomon, Cleopatra, Ariba and Enema, the last being vetoed quite unjustifiably for it ought to be a good name. I put the remainder on the board and also worked out a few sample lines:

Abdul: Stop! What's that over there?
"Come on, Raschid, what do you say?"

Raschid: Don't know.
"Mohammed?"

Mohammed: Let's investigate. (sic)

By the time I had gone round the groups suggesting that four girls could be going to wash clothes and other four to draw water the bell rang on round one and I felt that I was ahead on points.

Next day eight who had been absent (swimming) were present and we had to repeat the preliminaries, rather more briefly, after which I formed a new boys' group who were to give

thanks to, we finally decided, Allah, and a mixed group to include a girl who had worked in Cairo and knew a chair when she saw one. For the rest of that period they worked in groups and while there was a good deal of noise it was a busy noise.

The quality of the English, writing, spelling and punctuation varied enormously. I admit that my heart sank when the first I looked at read, in large, shaky capitals:

ABTUHOLT WOT IS IT
RASHRL I DO NOT NOW
ABDULL LET USEE WAT IS IT
MONAMED ABUT YOU MUST AVESIT AGIT
ABTUD YOU ARE RAT YUN WUN
RASHRL MABIE IS IS AVEIL SPRIL
ABOULL IS MA BEPONSAS
MOHAMED WOT HAPIN IF IT BASNE ABTUD

John Lennon *In His Own Write* could hardly equal this. However, with the help of other versions of the same:

Abdul: Halt! What is it?
Raschid: I do not know.
Abdul: Let us see what it is.
Mohammed: Abdul, you must investigate.
Abdul: You are right, young one.
Raschid: Maybe it is an evil spirit.
Abdul: It may be poisonous.
Mohammed: What happens if it bites me, Abdul?

Variant spellings were "yonge wone," "moset" (must), "no" (know) and so on. But the result, de-coded as above, is dialogue. Though each contained some unique feature, Groups I, II and III covered much the same ground and overlapped the beginning of Group IV's rather different assignment. The girl who had worked in Cairo was under the impression that drinks were still being served in silver cups as in the days of Pharaoh, Joseph and Benjamin.* She also produced the following definitions: "A table is what you sit at to eat food and a tray is what you carry the food on to the tables." Then, each member of Group V had written only her own lines, the group explaining orally that these were in strict rotation, in the order Cleopatra, Andrea, Sheda, Hariba. There was some repetition of complete lines where inspiration had flagged and they had striven after a pidgin English effect; "Me no frightened, me go over," which they rendered to be in a high-pitched sing-song style, more suggestive of *The Tea-House of the August Moon* than the genuine Bedouin. Group VI on the other hand had produced a sheet of dialogue suitable for stage production.

What I did then was to write out on separate sheets exactly what each group had written, correctly spelt and punctuated. In doing so, I noticed that Groups I and II could be combined and Group III omitted, while if the first three lines of Group IV were cut the rest followed on naturally. The best order seemed to be VI, I and II, V, IV, finishing on "Allah be praised!" from III. And I thought it needed a prologue.

This was assembled on the blackboard, the starting point being:

I look out of my tent.
What do I see?

The first (surprising) suggestion was "The dew on the grass," which I accepted, pointing out that it must be early in the morning. This drew "The sun rising" and with a little prodding "The sun rising on the desert sand." "Soon . . ." I suggested, and back came "it will be scorching." "Now the chair, which we don't know is a chair." "There is something strange on the sand." Casually I trimmed off the "sand" after "desert" and we had:

I look out of my tent.
What do I see?
The dew on the grass,
The sun rising on the desert.
Soon it will scorching.
There is something strange on the sand.

In the second-last week you can always find a girl who can cut stencils and I had thirty copies run off, borrowed some green sugar-paper from the Art Department, which obligingly guillotined covers to size, and to save time showed one of my regular classes how to staple the sheets together inside the covers; that alone took a period. I confidently approached 1F with these offerings.

Unfortunately my amateur typist had ignored the page numbers and used the Group numbers which I had failed to delete, luckily if extravagantly, taking a new stencil for each sheet. 1F

*Genesis, 44, 2; three more good nomadic tribal names, by the way.

leafed through in search of "our bit" and Group VI alone was satisfied, theirs being exactly as written. "Where's Group III?" "There's a bit o' oors missin'." "There's lines missed oot in oors ana'." Then an indignant howl from Group III: "Group IV's got ane o' oor lines."

I got them to push back the desks, expecting them to forget about it in the acting, but in vain. "Can we write in the bit that's missin'?" "Oors wasnae finished an' we've it a' worked oot what we're daein' wi' the chair." Group V had failed to recognise theirs since I had not only arranged their lines in sequence, but changed the names having to avoid two Cleopatras, Shebas, Andreas and Haribas, which wouldn't have mattered in the least. The scripts were a total inhibition on freedom of movement. They kept losing the place and one couldn't read his lines even when they were shown to him. That was quite clearly not the way to do it. Nevertheless, I was not dissatisfied; they were still on the hook.

Next day I gave them back their original scripts, plus an extra sheet of paper each. There were some protests in the other direction now but I told them they would be given the typed scripts later and allowed to decorate the covers. "Meantime, you're going to make a clean, well-written copy of what you've written here." I put them into their groups again and corrected one copy of each group's script.

And now another odd thing happened. Several quietly left their groups and moved off to work individually. I made no comment but corrected a script for each of the loners. "Can we change it?" one asked. "If you want to." They worked for a period at this and I took in the result. It was transformed. Even the boy who could not write, only print in capitals, had now a correct version with the words separated from each other and legible. There was a script two pages long, with new and original ideas in it; for example, calling a plane "the metal bird that makes so much noise" and the chair itself "the white man's camel" and "a sitting-thing," this last recognising something I had failed to make explicit, that a tribe which had never seen a chair would have no word for this "moveable seat for one."

The second week, which was also the last week of the session, began with still greater diversification. Group V had memorised their lines and wanted to rehearse, which they did sitting cross-legged round the prostrate chair. Several in various groups had left their scripts at home and one or two who had been absent the previous week now returned. I gave them scripts to read and decorate. A boy who had been cutting out palm trees in yellow and green added a crimson sun, two oddly shaped pieces of water and sky in royal blue, a brick-red pyramid and a brown camel. I made arrangements to have the project transferred to Room 18 where wall-plugs and a tape-recorder were available.

At the tape-recording various techniques were practised. We called on the Music Department to supply Saharan music and they produced a flute and a flautist who improvised. The prologue was read from a script, the girl who had wanted to learn it having failed to do so, and followed by word-perfect Group V in their harem-type twitterings. Group I, with one replacement, then did the Abdul-Raschid-Mohammed bit, while several *ad hoc* groups rehearsed from the typed scripts and from the two-page loner manuscript, outside the room. The need for silence during recording was demonstrated by the play-back which followed each item. Apart from Group V this was mainly a reading lesson, and a very effective one.

It was not a clean-cut, orderly project. From beginning to end it was a medley of mime and role-playing, verging on acting; composition, group, individual and class; reading and memorisation; decoration; and on my part chiefly improvisation. The end-products were imperfect, unstandardised, in some cases oddly attractive. That they enjoyed it is proved by the fact that for eight periods they did nothing else. It could and should have lasted longer; branching out into studies of real desert tribes, what they would carry water in, how they actually do wash clothes, costume, cooking and so on; not too early though, at the decoration stage perhaps. We could have made more use of music and were too quick off the mark with a script; their own group and individual efforts were capable of further development. In Mr Slevin's opinion a stage performance would not justify the time and effort required, and I concur; a tape-recording was much better since it let them hear themselves and could be compiled in short sections.